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RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHYN #0996/01 1461256
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
R 261256Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY SANAA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1998
INFO RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0098
RUEHMS/AMEMBASSY MUSCAT 0017
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

S E C R E T SANAA 000996

NOFORN
SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARP:AMACDONALD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/25/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [YM](#)

SUBJECT: ROYG WEATHERS UNITY DAY, BUT CHALLENGES PERSIST

REF: A. SANAA 833
[1](#)B. SANAA 950
[1](#)C. SANAA 951

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) While the ROYG celebrated the 19th anniversary of Yemen's unification with a massive military parade, anti-unity and anti-ROYG demonstrators took to the streets across Yemen's restive southern governorates. In Aden, security forces fired on protesters, killing three and injuring 30. Former Yemeni Vice President Ali Salem al-Beidh used the occasion to declare himself the leader of the Southern Movement, while another former southern leader, Ali Nasser Mohamed, described southern independence as an undesirable option. While the ROYG has weathered yet another potential flash point for unrest, tensions remain high in Yemen's southern governorates as its population waits for evidence the ROYG is ready to address its legitimate concerns. End Summary.

ROYG Celebration of Unity

[1](#)2. (C) The ROYG marked the 19th anniversary of Yemen's unity with a massive military parade on May 21 in Sana'a. The parade, which commenced following a parachute drop, was the largest in Yemen's history and the first military parade on Unity Day in 15 years. Yemen's Republican Guard, which is headed by presidential son Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, was well represented by 12,000 marching soldiers as well as armored vehicles, T-72 and T-55 tanks, artillery pieces and self-propelled anti-aircraft guns. (Note: Among the armored vehicles was the first public exhibition of Iraqi Light Armored Vehicles (ILAVs) provided by the United States. The ILAVs caused some confusion among spectators, one of whom proudly told POL/E Chief that they were the first ever Yemeni-made armored vehicles. End Note.) The parade also featured SS21 and Scud missiles, 5,000 soldiers from the first armored division, troops from the Ministry of Interior and three to four thousand military academy students. There were also extensive flyovers by Mig 5 and Mig 29 fighters, SU 22 fighters and helicopters. President Saleh observed the parade from behind bullet-proof glass. Directorate of Military Intelligence liaison Ahmed Alous told EMBOFF that this was the first time the President had ever taken such precautions.

[1](#)3. (U) In a televised speech marking the day, Saleh described Yemen's unity as being as strong as the mountains. He dismissed southern separatists as "outlaws" who spread hatred and separatist trends and want to turn back history.

Saleh also called on all political parties and civil-society organizations to pursue responsible dialogue as the proper method for solving the nation's problems.

Violence at Demonstrations in Aden

¶4. (S/NF) The same day, three demonstrators were killed and thirty were injured in the Sheikh Othman area of Aden. Adeni businessman Ahmed Saeed Shukri told POL/E Chief on May 25 that his brother Anis Shukri had attended the demonstration and described what he saw. According to Shukri, when the protesters arrived on May 21 for a peaceful demonstration which they had expected to consist only of speeches and the raising of the flag of the old People's Republic of Yemen, they found security forces, including plainclothes officers, in place and snipers stationed in buildings surrounding the demonstration area. After the crowd had gathered, the security forces fired tear gas canisters into the crowd. The snipers and the remainder of the security forces then opened fire on the crowd. Shukri asserted that the demonstrators took no provocative action prior to the security forces opening fire. After security forces attacked, however, Shukri said the demonstrators fought back and began to damage property.

¶5. (S/NF) Shukri told POL/E Chief that when the injured were brought to Al-Naqeeb hospital, security forces attempted to prevent his cousin, neurosurgeon Dr. AbdulHameed Shukri, from treating them. Dr. Shukri, who is also a member of the Southern Movement, defied the security forces, saying that he was a doctor and the people needed help. Dr. Shukri told his cousin that while the majority of the injured suffered bullet wounds to the abdomen and lower extremities, at least two of those killed were taken with clean headshots, one between the eyes and the other in the forehead, consistent with a sniper attack. (Comment. We do not have any independent corroboration of Shukri's rendition of events. End Comment.)

¶6. (C) The demonstrations then spread north to the Dar al-Amir District and, unusually for Yemen, continued through the afternoon, when Yemenis normally stop what they are doing to chew qat, and into the evening. A demonstration in the Hadramout city of Mukulla resulted in two injuries. In the governorates of Lahj, Dhale, Abyan and Shebwa the ROYG wisely allowed the small-scale demonstrations to take place without interference and no violence was reported. Additional skirmishes took place at ROYG roadblocks on highways at the border between the Aden Governorate and the governorates of Abyan and Lahj. ROYG forces set up the roadblocks a day before the demonstrations and turned back anyone who did not give an acceptable justification for travelling to Aden. (Note: Preventing outsiders from entering large cities is a known ROYG strategy for keeping demonstrations under control. End Note.) On May 21, Ministry of Defense-controlled website 26september.net denied that any clashes had taken place between ROYG forces and demonstrators, attributing the injuries to those hurling stones at the scene. On May 25, a spokesman for the Ministry of Interior's Operations Center told the embassy that security forces had only "fired into the air."

Arrests

¶7. (S/NF) Press reports indicate that the ROYG arrested more than 300 people in the wake of the protests, including Dr. Shukri. These arrests are in addition to the approximately 500 suspected "organizers" detained prior to the demonstrations. At least one media source reported on May 25 that "armed groups" had given the ROYG 48 hours to release the detainees. The report did not indicate what would happen if the ROYG declined to do so. Ahmed Shukri told POL/E Chief that people from his (and Dr. Shukri's) hometown are travelling to Aden to demand the doctor's release.

Media Suppression Expanding

¶18. (U) In addition to preventing certain domestic newspapers from reporting on events in the South (ref A), the ROYG has also confiscated at least one foreign newspaper. The Sana'a correspondent for London-based Al Quds Al Arabi told PAO that its issues from May 18, 21, 22 and 23 had been confiscated by the Ministry of Interior in response to frank reporting on challenges to Yemen's unity.

Southern Leaders Chime in from Abroad

¶19. (S/NF) In a speech aired by al-Jazeera and BBC Arabic, former Vice President of the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and briefly, in 1994, President of the breakaway Democratic Republic of Yemen (DRY) Ali Salem al-Beidh, speaking from Europe, declared himself the leader of the Southern movement. He called on the international community to pressure the Saleh government to remove its forces from what he described as the "occupied south." (Note: In spite of Beidh's rhetoric, the Southern Movement in Yemen did not make a public declaration of secession, as some had believed it would. End Note.) Oman, where Beidh has been living since he fled Yemen in 1994, responded to his announcement by stripping him of his Omani citizenship. (Note: Beidh had been welcomed to Oman on the condition that he refrain from political activities involving Yemen. His claiming the leadership of the Southern Movement violated that condition. End Note.) In spite of his announcement, Beidh does not enjoy unconditional support in the Southern Movement. Prominent Adeni businessman of Hadrami descent Adnan al-Kaff told EMBOFF on May 23 that the Southern Movement is waiting for a leader and Beidh is not generally viewed as an effective leader. Former PDRY President Ali Nasser Mohamed made a less inflammatory statement, saying that the country would have to make changes to address southern concerns or accept the eventuality of an independent South. He went on, however, to call the second option an unfavorable one. On May 23 Yahya al-Houthi, brother of rebel leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi, announced on the rebel group's website his support for Yemen's Unity.

Trouble Spreading?

¶10. (U) The press reported on May 25 that a group calling itself the "Peaceful Movement for the Sons of Tihama" was forming a working group to prepare for peaceful acts intended to force the ROYG to address issues relevant to those living in Tihama (a fertile area between Sana'a and the Red Sea). In its communique, the group strongly criticized the suppression of demonstrations in Aden.

Comment

¶11. (C) Displays of military might and suppression of demonstrations by security forces are unlikely to silence the voices of those calling for southern independence. Nor did Saleh's call for dialogue do much to persuade dissidents that he is serious about addressing their grievances. Recent efforts by the ROYG to demonstrate its commitment to improve conditions in the south (refs B and C) are a positive step, but many suspect these gestures will cease as soon as tensions subside. Until the ROYG initiates serious, sustained engagement with the south, the region will remain a tinderbox likely to explode at any moment. End Comment.

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